

Narrative Proposal EJSG Work Plan

A. *La Semilla Food Center Community Farm's "Nuestro Desierto Delicioso, Youth Conference and Project Purpose Statement*

La Semilla Food Center Community Farm's *Nuestro Desierto Delicioso* Youth Conference (Our Delicious Desert) will be an interactive, regional event aimed at engaging low income, youth of color in environmental resiliency activities and addressing key issues impacting our desert environment.

The proposed conference will be held primarily at La Semilla Community Farm, based in Anthony, New Mexico. The central focus of the conference will be to connect youth of color to the local foods movement and its connection to the growing Green Jobs sector in our community. In doing so, our intent is to help youth successfully grow into the next generation of educators, farmers, food activists, and engaged community members through garden and farm-based workshops, capacity building activities, teaching youth about the issues shaping the policy environment and how to be part of creating a thriving, healthy food system.

The key statute that our project will focus on is the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, Section 20(a): conduct research, development, monitoring, public education, training, demonstration projects, and studies on pesticides.

The mission of the farm is to increase access to fresh and locally grown produce for families, increase access to sustainable agriculture training opportunities, demonstrate the viability of small and sustainable agriculture and inspire environmental stewardship in the Paso del Norte Region. The farm serves as an education and demonstration site for local families and producers. We offer educational programming based on innovative agroecological farming practices well suited for our desert climate *including soil fertility (cover crops), irrigation methods and apiculture and pollinator ecology.*

B. Environmental, Public Health and community climate resiliency

The Paso del Norte Region, encompassing Southern New Mexico and El Paso, Texas, is a culturally diverse area rich in tradition. Located on the U.S./Mexico border, the region is unique with a population reflecting American, Mexican and indigenous backgrounds. The region has a rich agricultural heritage, once boasting a variety of family farms and diverse vegetable producers. In recent years, however, this heritage has all but disappeared due to numerous factors including persistent drought, increased monocrop cultivation, dairy farms and an aging farmer population. These factors combined have given way to increasingly detrimental ecological, community, and health issues.

Though there is no denying the richness of tradition and culture that exists in the Paso del Norte region, many residents grapple with the effects of high levels of poverty. The effects of poverty are pervasive and result in high levels of food insecurity and diet-related illness, like diabetes and heart disease. The U.S.-México Border Diabetes Prevention and Control Project estimates that roughly 72% of adults in our region are obese or overweight while 16 % of border residents have diabetes; an additional 14 percent have pre-diabetes. Though the statistics for food related illnesses may be higher in the borderlands, these issues are not necessarily unique to the region. Food-related illnesses have become a leading cause of death in the United States, rivaling tobacco. A high-calorie diet, combined with a lack of exercise, accounts for one-fifth of

the annual deaths in the U.S. In fact, six of the fifteen leading causes of death are related to poor diet and low physical activity (Meter 2009: 1-2). Conservative estimates from New Mexico indicate that improving residents' diets could save \$140 million in healthcare costs per year (NM Food Gap Task Force 2008: i); the cost savings within the Paso del Norte region may be similar. Almost 25 % of residents in Doña Ana County live below poverty level. Both health and poverty levels are closely linked with food insecurity with 16% of residents facing food insecurity. The rate of childhood food insecurity is even greater, with 30 percent of Doña Ana County children being food insecure.

Lack of access to fresh and healthy foods that contributes to food insecurity has devastating consequences for individual, family, and community health. To highlight the lack of access to fresh and healthy foods, we can look to fruit and vegetable consumption in Dona Ana County where the percentage of Adult Fruit and Vegetable Consumption is 19.5% for adults aged 30-45. And the rates of vegetable consumption for children are equally bleak. Through La Semilla's Edible Education program, we can attest to the consequences of a broken food system where children and families are disconnected from food production and have not learned cooking skills. In the school setting, we have witnessed many students who have never tried many fruits and vegetables, such as an apple. Addressing the lack of access to local foods is but one strategy towards helping to increase fresh food consumption. Education is also necessary to engage youth and families in learning about food -how to grow it and how to cook in ways that are both tasty and healthy. The food environment (the kinds of foods easily accessible in a community) has a direct impact on health.

While La Semilla Food Center works throughout the Paso del Norte region, we focus our work in colonia communities. Colonia communities are defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) through their proximity to the border, lack of basic services and low-income populations. Dona Ana County is home to 37 of New Mexico's 141 federally recognized colonia communities and is one of the poorest Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the United States. Additionally, many of the communities we serve exist in federally recognized food deserts. Colonias developments are particularly vulnerable to flooding and other issues due to the lack of infrastructure available as well as "the physical , economic, and political marginalization and alienation from larger urban cores and other centers of power." (Nunez-Mchiri, 2009:70)

Currently, there are a handful of community food projects, beginning farmers programs, and policy advocacy efforts underway in the region to improve our food system. This project helps "tell the story" of these efforts and local foods generally to an under-served population yearning to know more and connect better. By engaging residents in food desert areas of urban and rural communities we can dramatically increase health outcomes, support our burgeoning local economies, and create viable market opportunities for area farmers.

La Semilla Food Center (La Semilla) believes that addressing concerns regarding high rates of diabetes, obesity, hunger, and access to healthy and fresh foods requires a sustained commitment to the development of viable alternatives that link food, health, environment and local economies. To this end, La Semilla works to establish viable food chains reflecting the real value of food, innovative programming that attracts young people to agriculture, and robust community partnerships and networks that can jointly realize systemic change.

Through our programmatic areas including our Community Farm, our goal is to promote social and economic entrepreneurship activities rooted in local food production. To achieve this we focus on activities that: 1) Empower youth participation in local food system development; 2) Teach children, youth, and adults about the links between food, health, and local economies; 3)

Encourage participation in farmers' markets, cooperatives, and local business development; 4) Foster farm to school programs and infrastructure development to increase local food system viability and enhance student nutrition; 5) Provide a forum to train young farmers in traditional and innovative agricultural methods that are environmentally friendly; 6) Build community partnerships and networks that support local food system development; and 7) Partner with organizations and agencies to advocate for improved family, community, and environmental health.

Our proposed project, *Nuestro Desierto Delicioso* Youth Conference, will be organized recognizing the challenges facing youth in the region and understanding that in order to affect change we must begin to engage typically underserved youth to become the next generation of leaders. Furthermore, we recognize that in order to have a secure food system, we must have a thriving natural environment. By addressing the overuse of chemical pesticides in our region and demonstrating how we can rebuild soil and utilize agroecological techniques, we can affect long-term change in our communities. We believe there is untapped potential to produce and provide whole, healthy food to the residents of our region, particularly those that are impoverished and underserved, that can address food insecurity, diet-related health concerns, provide local economic opportunities, and increase environmental stewardship (especially regarding the use of precious water resources). Our region is situated to grow produce year-round, given our climate. La Semilla Community Farm is both an ideal and challenging location but is central to our message and belief that we can transform our food system, nourish our communities and heal the land that we depend on to grow.

C. Organization's Historical Connection to the Affected Community

La Semilla Food Center was established in 2010. Prior to this, we worked with youth and families to create community gardens, construct greenhouses, pilot youth development and educational projects, and conduct youth-driven community food assessments in communities along the U.S.-Mexico Border. La Semilla grew out of these efforts as well as the need for an entity devoted to local food system education in our region. To date, we are one of the only organizations; La Semilla practices a shared leadership model and works from an asset-based approach that strengthens individual, community, and environmental health while providing job creation and training. In this way, La Semilla plays a pivotal role by providing the tools, space, and opportunities for youth and families to improve their life circumstances economically and socially through food and farm training and education. Since our inception, we have taught more than 4,000 elementary and middle school students how to grow and cook fresh food while establishing a 14 acre education and demonstration farm in Anthony, New Mexico.

Through our diverse programmatic areas, La Semilla staff has extensive experience working to address community food security challenges in the Paso Del Norte region. Prior to La Semilla, current staff worked with youth and families to create community gardens, construct greenhouses, pilot youth development and educational projects, conduct youth-driven community food assessments, and secure technical assistance for these community food project endeavors in Anthony, Chaparral, and Vado through the Colonias Development Councils' Cultivando Tradición Program. Staffs facilitate extensive and ongoing participatory regional food policy and planning efforts and foster dialogue by hosting community forums to further local food system education goals and secure the resources for this purpose. Finally, we have worked with residents to explore asset development strategies including leveraging funding for higher education scholarships, youth wages, and garden produce marketing. These

efforts have led La Semilla to realize a Community Farm which is currently in its 3rd season of vegetable production.

La Semilla Community Farm is located in Anthony, New Mexico. In 2011, we received a 14 acre donation of farmland from a generous local nursery owner to begin this effort who believes in the work that we do in the region. The Farm is centrally located and accessible to people from all communities in the Paso del Norte region. Through this donation, we have been able to develop a land base from which we have begun to grow crops for sale, train youth in farming and marketing, generate income to support programming, and provide a place to demonstrate new crops and farming techniques. Though we are in the nascent stages of many of these goals, we have worked extensively with other local organizations, built on local farmers' expertise and harnessed the energy of youth and families.

La Semilla Community Farm has been built on the local expertise, resources, and capabilities of staff, community partners and youth and their families who have been instrumental in developing not only the vision of the farm but our young organization. There exists extraordinary knowledge among residents and elders. Yet, most lack the land and water resources to practice that knowledge and ensure it is passed to future generations. The Farm provides this necessary resource that can simultaneously address food access concerns making fresh produce readily available, convenient, and affordable for low-income residents to purchase. We work to engage youth and their families through a series of free workshops, Community Celebrations, Youth Cooking Nights, Summer Camps and our main training program – Raíces de Tradición y Salud (Roots of Tradition and Health).

D. Project Description

La Semilla Food Center proposes to hold the *Nuestro Desierto Delicioso* Youth Conference" in late fall 2015 and spring 2016. The seasonal conferences will build on our community farm's work with underserved youth of color and focus on providing them with a daylong event filled with interactive workshops featuring topics based on agroecological farming techniques and healthy living (i.e. organic farming, building native bee houses, composting, native desert plants and healthy cooking) and a Green Jobs Fair.

In communities such as Anthony, where La Semilla Food Community Farm is based and surrounding communities in Dona Ana County, there are few recreational or economic opportunities for youth. Current data places the high school graduation rate at 74% and the unemployment rate at 8.1 % in Dona Ana County, both well below the national averages. With such statistics, it is imperative that there are alternative opportunities for youth to engage in so that they can break out of systemic cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement by having a space to reconnect within their communities.

La Semilla Food Center's Raíces de Tradición y Salud program offers youth the opportunity to develop leadership, nutrition, business, and life skills in order to help develop and address key educational and recreational disparities for youth in southern Dona Ana County and Anthony, Texas. Due to the success and interest that has been generated around the Raíces program, La Semilla proposes the *Nuestro Desierto Delicioso* Youth Conference, as an expansion of our programming to address the need for increased youth engagement and mentorship in local food systems development as well future career paths in great green jobs economy.

Our audience and participants for the conference will be youth from surrounding colonias/low-income regions in Chaparral, Anthony, Las Cruces, New Mexico and El Paso, Texas. Youth in

our region are often labeled as “disconnected” due to their lack of participation in school-activities or in the job market. As aforementioned, our Community Farm has shown that youth from our region, who often face obstacles due to the rural location of their homes, are hungry for the chance to participate, to learn and are looking for employment and guidance to help their families or gain independence. Youth participants in our Raíces de Tradición program are armed with tools to make informed decisions about what they consume and how to become engaged community members. We propose this Youth Conference because often there is a lack of representation in meaningful activities and leadership opportunities which address community resiliency efforts by people most impacted by environmental injustices. In order to create a strong, resilient food system in our community, we must make a connection between our physical environment and our health and train the next generation of food activists to protect and heal the land.

The seasonal conference will bring together various organizations throughout the Paso Del Norte Region who work in the areas of social justice and in the local food system to create and present workshop topics and serve as peer leaders/mentors for youth participants. Our primary partner will be the Southwest Environment Center (SWEC) based in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The Southwest Environmental Center was established in 1992 and speaks for wildlife and wild places in the southwestern borderlands. SWEC works to protect and restore vital habitats, like Otero Mesa and Rio Grande, and endangered species, like the Mexican gray wolf. The Southwest Environmental Center is determined not to let the web of life unravel in the Southwest. For the youth conference, SWEC will provide technical support and help with workshop design.

SWEC's Education for a Sustainable Society Program fosters an informed and active constituency for biodiversity throughout the region. SWEC recently partnered with La Semilla to cosponsor Native Bee House Building and Topbar Beekeeping workshops at La Semilla Community Farm. Participants created natural and recycled habitats to attract native pollinators to backyard, school and community gardens, farms and public spaces.

Participants learned about natural beekeeping and being a steward of a chemical-free honeybee colony, including hive design, bee biology & the life cycle of the hive, seasonal comb management, disease management, harvesting honey and making wax products. In the spring, La Semilla plans to partner with SWEC during youth farm camp programming to learn about bats and create bat boxes for habitat on La Semilla Community Farm, fostering a healthy ecology that provides habitat for these wonderful natural pest control assistants.

La Semilla Food Center proposes our Community Farm as the main site for the conference because it is a space that serves as an agroecological learning laboratory for area youth through the Raíces de Tradición y Salud and Farm Apprenticeship programs. As aforementioned, the farm is located on a parcel of land that was donated by a local business owner. Prior to being utilized by La Semilla community Farm, the farm land was used for commercial cotton production. After years of production and exposure to pesticide use, the land lay fallow. In 2013, La Semilla invited community members to join staff members to bless the land before our first year of vegetable crop production. Since the establishment of the farm, we have had to deal with considerable challenges from dealing with a high level of salinity in our well water to the rehabilitation of the soil. La Semilla Community Farm has utilized innovative practices on the farm to begin to build a space that is sustainable and can be used to teach our community best practices related to growing in an arid climate. These techniques and best practices will be featured in our conference workshops.

The *Nuestro Desierto Delicioso* Youth Conference will:

- Focus on agroecology to teach how to grow pesticide free and build up soil that has been depleted due to overuse of pesticides as the quality and care of soil become increasingly important as we face climate challenges
- Address issues of water scarcity, conservation and pollution
- Composting
- Explore and Promote Desert ecology-
 - Planting desert edibles such as mesquite/cactus
 - Cooking Demonstrations featuring “Ancestral wellness”
 - Native Bee Workshops
 - Solar Energy Demonstrations
- Feature a Green Jobs Fair for Youth
 - Professional Development Sessions – How to prepare a resume, how to dress for an interview
 - Create Mentorship Opportunities

The proposed project provides an opportunity for engagement and applied education for youth that leads to long term change by reconnecting youth to each other, their community, and the land. Additionally, the youth conference will expose participants to employment and mentorship opportunities within our community. The *Nuestro Desierto Delicioso* Youth Conference is an opportunity that will continue to build upon the work of our Farm and lay the groundwork to continue creating opportunities for youth to affect long-term change in the Paso del Norte Region. The Green Jobs Fair will feature local business that work in a variety of industries such as solar energy, recycling and organic farming to expose youth to future career paths.

E. Organizational Capacity and Programmatic Capability

Since La Semilla’s establishment in 2010, we have developed several areas of programming including Edible Education, Community Farm, Farm Fresh, Food Policy and Planning. As a result of these efforts, we have taught over 4,000 elementary and middle school students how to grow and cook fresh food, established a 14 acre education and demonstration farm in Anthony, New Mexico and are working on passing comprehensive Urban Ag Policy for the City of Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Our Community Farm is currently entering its 3rd season of production and we have successfully transitioned 12 acres of land previously used in monocrop production into diversified fruit and vegetable production. Additionally, we secured funding necessary to install infrastructure for this transition including an irrigation well, filtration system, hoop house and solar panels. The farm is in a unique position to be a demonstration site and education center to train community members in agroecological and permaculture farming techniques and be the host for the proposed youth conference.

F. Qualifications of the Principal Investigator or Project Manager (PI/PM)

Catherine Yanez, Community Farm Programs, oversees Community Farm youth programs and will be the *primary project director for the Youth Conference*. Growing up in Canutillo influenced her decision to become a FoodCorps Service Member in 2011, growing a garden

and teaching nutrition to students in Anthony, New Mexico. She has worked with Canutillo High School as an AVID (Advanced Via Individual Determination) tutor, and with Girl Scouts, empowering girls with leadership skills, and building courage, confidence and character. She received her Bachelor of Liberal Arts Degree from the University of Texas at El Paso with a major in History and a minor in Criminal Justice

Priscilla Garcia, Youth Programs Assistant, provides support for La Semilla's Raíces de Tradición youth program and will be the project assistant for the *Nuestro Desierto Delicioso Youth Conference*. Priscilla was raised in Anthony, NM and has studied horticulture at NMSU. As a crew leader, she helped to develop the Anthony Community Garden through the Colonias Development Council. Priscilla participates in the American Friends Service Committee's beginning farmer training program. She is especially interested in medicinal uses for herbs and has become a mentor for both Raices participants and Farm Apprentices.

Cristina Dominguez Eschelman, Farm Director, oversees La Semilla Community Farm development and programming. She specializes in program development and farm-based education. She holds a Certificate in Ecological Horticulture from the Farm and Garden Apprenticeship from the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at the University of California Santa Cruz and is certified in Permaculture Design. Prior to La Semilla, Cristina worked for Heifer International, focusing on participatory community development and sustainable agriculture projects along the US-Mexico border. She is a past AmeriCorps VISTA service member and a native of El Paso. Cristina obtained her Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, TX. She currently serves on the Board of Directors for Farm to Table, a Santa Fe-based nonprofit.

G. Past Performance in Reporting on Outputs and Outcomes

Evaluation data provide critical information needed to monitor program impact, especially as we look to enhance program impact through expansion. Project staff will work closely with our external evaluator Cathilia Flores and youth participants to ensure the use of culturally appropriate tools and participatory practices. A range of quantitative and qualitative methods will be used to monitor progress. In general, the data collected will include: pre- and post-knowledge assessments, production logs, and end-of-program surveys and facilitated discussions with youth and their families. La Semilla tracks all quantitative program data through internal tracking logs, including: activities, participants, hours, etc.

H. Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP) Information

N/A